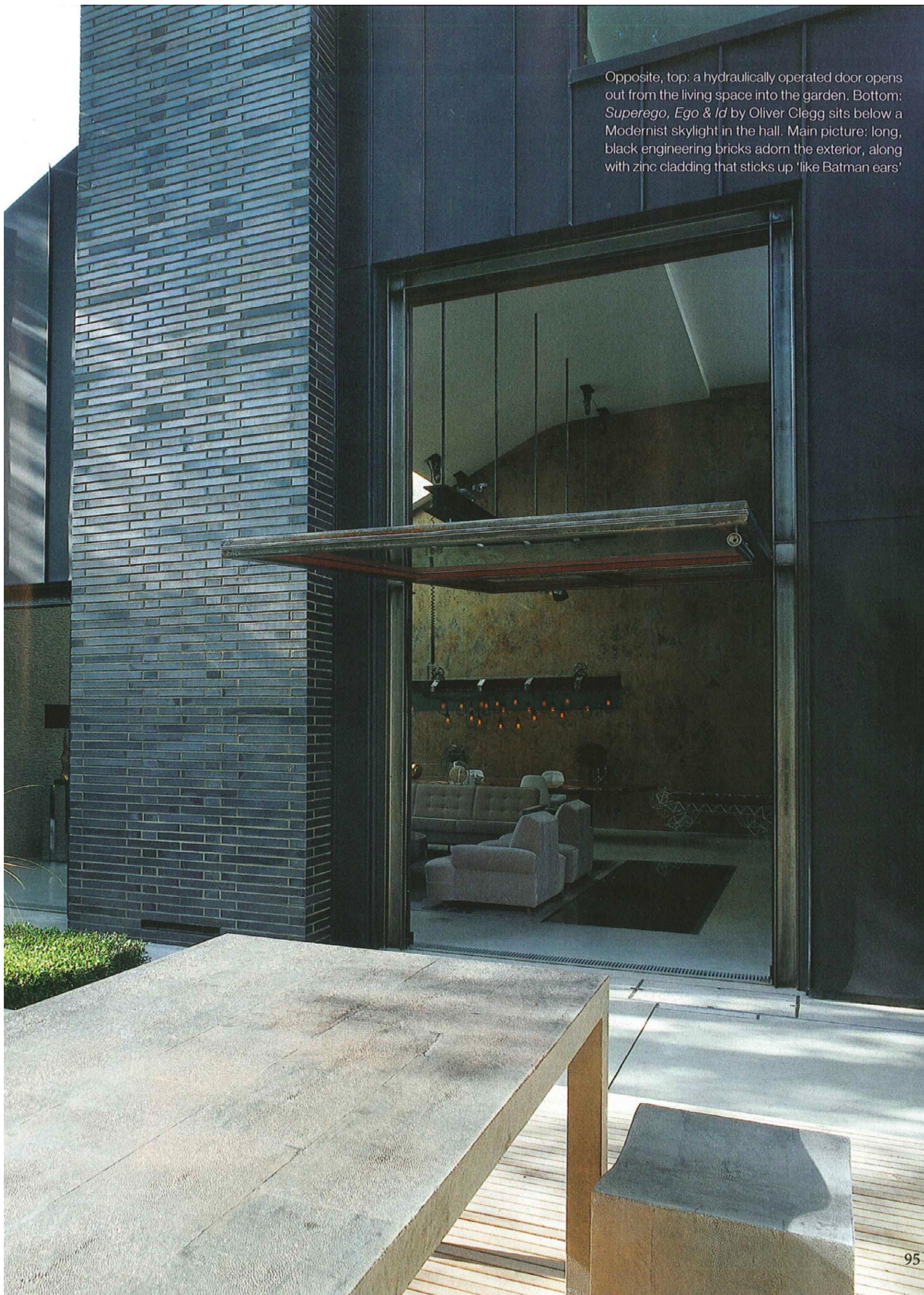


LAUNCH PAD

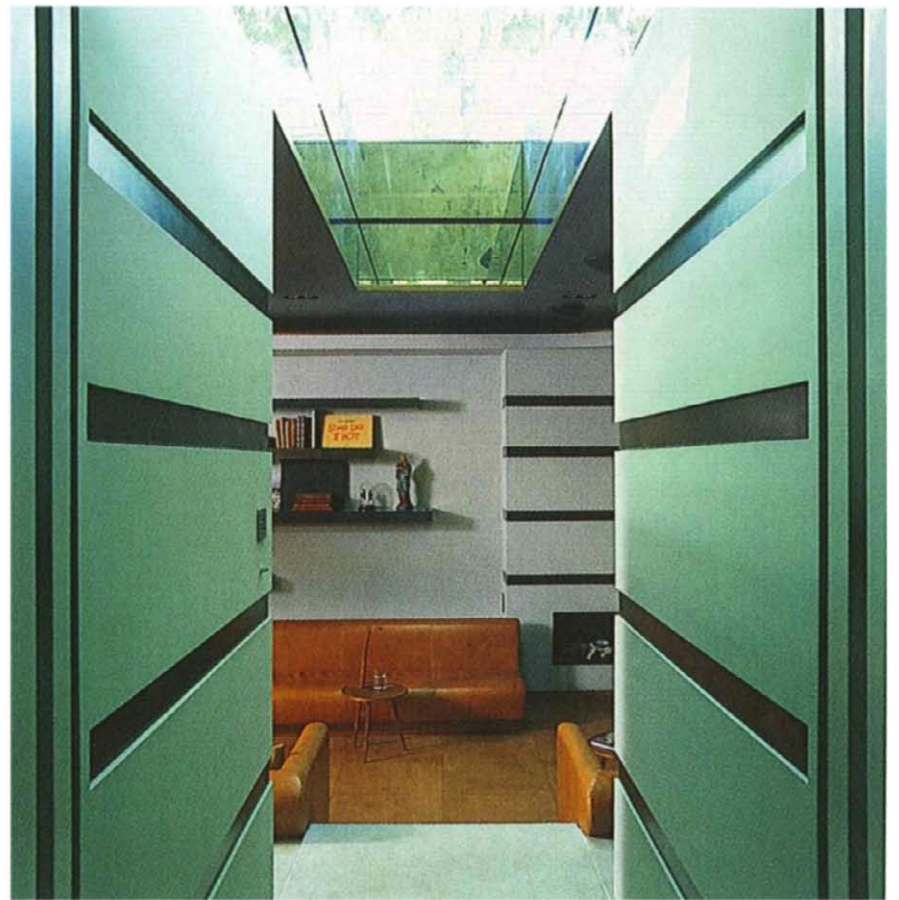
With hydraulic doors straight out of *Thunderbirds*, a moveable television on a winch and a cinema/library in the basement, this Wells Mackereth-designed den in London's Maida Vale is a veritable Batcave of boys' toys and Modernist man-gadgets. It's F-A-B, decides Matt Gibberd. Photography: Simon Upton



Opposite, top: a hydraulically operated door opens out from the living space into the garden. Bottom: *Superego, Ego & Id* by Oliver Clegg sits below a Modernist skylight in the hall. Main picture: long, black engineering bricks adorn the exterior, along with zinc cladding that sticks up 'like Batman ears'

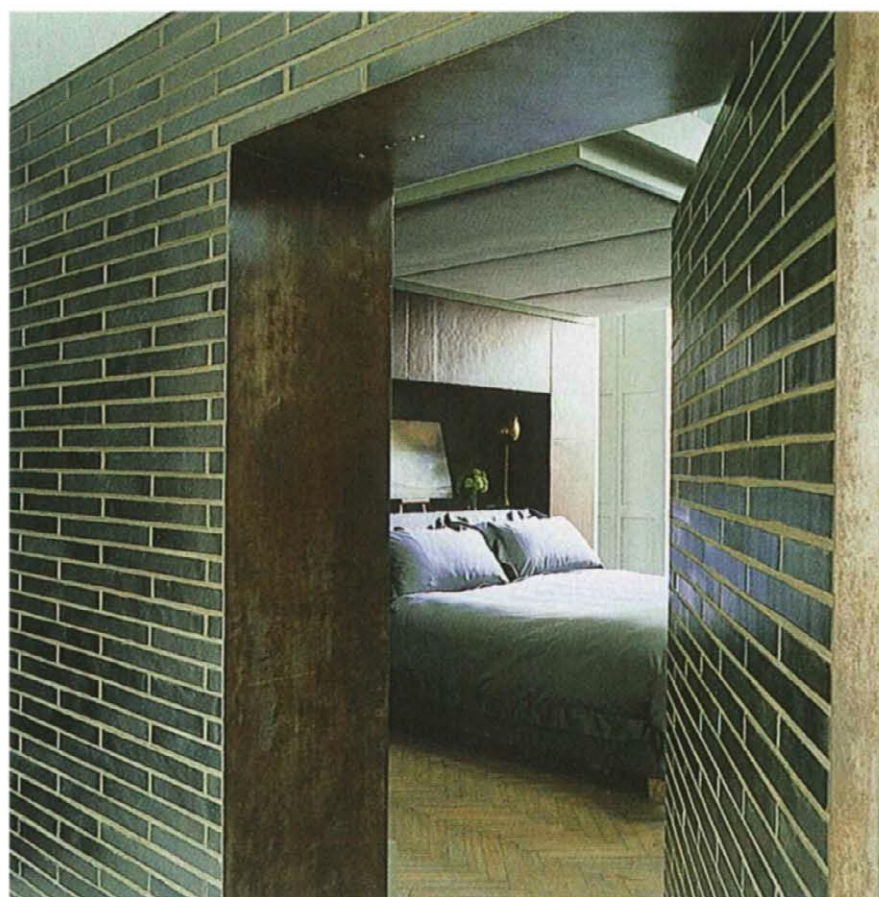






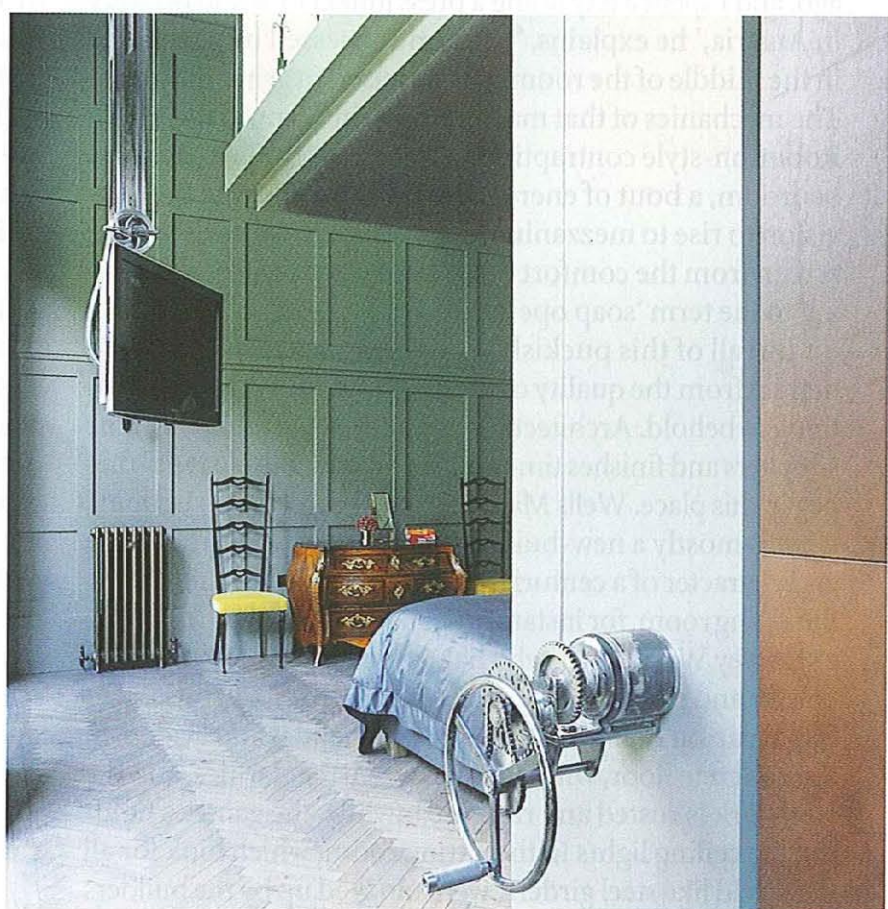
The spacious sitting room area (left) includes side tables by George Nelson, a Florence Knoll sofa, an aluminium table by Barber Osgerby for Established & Sons and a 'Draw' rug by Kate Blee from Christopher Farr. The sunken kitchen was built to resemble the one in Frank Sinatra's house in Palm Springs. A glass panel in the floor (top) lets in light to the basement cinema/library (above), with its conversation pit in chestnut leather from Walter Reginald





Industrial cage-style fittings from Historic Lighting (left) dangle from a Wells Mackereth-designed chandelier. Underneath is a bespoke table hand-made by George Nakashima in Bastogne walnut and 'Tudor' chairs by Jaime Hayón for Established & Sons. The weathered effect of the kitchen's sheet-steel sliding doors (top) can also be seen on the patinated-steel edges of the *Scooby-Doo* door (above), which is set into more black engineering brick





Left: in the old coach house, the bedroom features wooden panelling and a parquet floor reclaimed from the Partridge Fine Art workshop. A pair of 1960s Italian brass and glass lamps flank *Kenya*, a landscape painting by Maia Burnet above the bed. Top: a secret *Scooby-Doo* door in the wall joins the coach house to the new part of the building. Above: the television can be winched up to the mezzanine-level bathroom for a spot of tub-time viewing

'THE BUILDERS CALL IT the Thunderbird house,' says architect Sally Mackereth, as a humongous hydraulic door pivots open like a catflap designed for an elephant. This is a building that appeals to the child in us all, and Mackereth's young son, Oscar, is highly envious of his mother's latest project. 'He keeps a list beside his bed of all the things he wants in his next house.' An electrically operated moonroof is high on the agenda, along with a cinema screen that drops down from the ceiling. I feel a move coming on.

As a matter of fact, the owner of this London home, Hosh Ibrahim, is something of a big kid himself. 'I wanted to put a camera in the bathroom mirror that would enable me to see the back of my head when I'm shaving it,' he smiles, 'but Sally vetoed it.' For Hosh – an actor, modern-architecture enthusiast and the son of a Sudanese telecoms mogul – this project is the realisation of a thousand bedside lists.

Top of the roster was that hydraulic door, partly because of the sheer drama of the thing, but also because it allows Hosh and his friends to smoke in the garden without being rained on. Then there's the deliberately overwrought light fitting above the dining table, which can be raised or lowered using a pulley system because Hosh couldn't decide on the optimum height. 'I played the lead in a film years ago, and I spent a day doing a press junket in an old brewery in Austria,' he explains. 'I became obsessed by a machine in the middle of the room that was used to grind the hops.' The mechanics of that machine have influenced the Heath Robinson-style contraptions throughout the house. In the bedroom, a bout of energetic winding will cause the television to rise to mezzanine level, where Hosh can view the screen from the comfort of his bath (lending a new meaning to the term 'soap opera').

But all of this puckish tomfoolery is never allowed to detract from the quality of the architecture, which is something to behold. Architects are great ones for using the same suppliers and finishes time and again, but nothing is off-the-peg in this place. Wells Mackereth has succeeded in imbuing what is mostly a new-build house with the warmth, patina and character of a centuries-old structure. The main wall in the sitting room, for instance, has been finished by the painter Harvey Woodward, who has trowelled on and hacked off plaster and paint, allowing dribbles to form and blisters to bubble up on the surface. The human hand is also evident in the concrete floor, with its swirls and irregularities, and the steelwork is rusted and raw. Meanwhile, the gantries holding the ceiling lights in the sitting room, which look for all the world like steel girders, were mocked up by the builders using MDF. 'I feel like we tapped into a dying breed of traditional British craftsmen,' says Mackereth, 'people who help you detail something and make it work.'

The site they inherited consisted of a coach house at the front, where the bedroom is now, and an asbestos-roofed shed at the rear, which had been subsumed by plants and had to be demolished. 'It was the old workshop for Partridge Fine Art of Bond Street,' says Mackereth, who worked for

John Stefanidis and Stanton Williams before forming her own practice with James Wells in 1995. 'We were keen to retain a sense of the industrial heritage of the site, which is rooted as a place where things are made.' The postman popped his head in one day to see what all the noise was about, and told them that the Queen Mother had once visited the building many years ago.

A wonderfully weighty *Scooby-Doo* door, secreted away in a wall of black engineering brick, now divides the old part of the house from the new. Given a hearty shove in the correct spot, ideally with the help of a run-up, the door will swing open with a suitably regal sense of ceremony to reveal the bedroom. HRH would surely have approved. The architects have recycled the parquet floor from the workshop, panelled the walls and left the beams exposed, so that it feels, says Mackereth, 'like a railway ticketing hall'. A 1960s Italian glass chandelier teeters on the precipice of bad taste and lends a touch of Palm Springs glamour. 'You need that to send the whole thing up.' The bedroom gives on to a verdant Victorian pleasure garden designed by the Chelsea gold medallist Chris Moss, complete with hornbeam, box and an auricula theatre.

The most decadent room in the house is the library/cinema in the basement, which has Charlotte Perriand-inspired shelves capped in bronze and a conversation pit finished in chestnut leather, complete with a throw made from the skins of unsuspecting coyotes. It exudes the smell and luxury of a gentlemen's club or a Savile Row shop, but not in a precious way. 'I don't want it to feel like an airport lounge,' explains Hosh, who is unfazed by the scuffs and stains that testify to some bacchanalian late nights.

Wells Mackereth does a lot of work in the high-end retail sector, and much of the build was carried out by shopfitters. 'It's about seduction and surprise, scale and illusion. A jewellery store ends up feeling like a town house, and vice versa.' Mackereth's aspiration is to apply this philosophy to the design of a hotel. No matter what the next commission is, however, she may struggle to find a client as accommodating and passionate as Hosh Ibrahim, who has given the architects a lengthy creative leash while throwing himself into the project with gusto. 'He has a great eye, and he is excited by architecture,' says Mackereth. 'This house was built for his own indulgence – it's not about showing off.' Hosh has an innate understanding of the building process, having previously project-managed the creation of a hospital in Sudan, and he plans to team up with like-minded folk to carry out some residential development projects.

Sally Mackereth secretly wishes that her own house were a bit more like this one. Arch minimalist John Pawson visited and was apparently very impressed, Hosh's friends love it and, by all accounts, the nosy postman is beside himself with envy. I must admit to a little of this myself; much like young Oscar's, the pen on my bedside table is rapidly running out of ink ■

For more information on Wells Mackereth, ring 020 7495 7055, or visit wellsmackereth.com

Opposite: on a cantilevered mezzanine above the bedroom, the bathroom enjoys a touch of kitsch courtesy of a 1960s Venetian-glass chandelier and the moveable television system. 'This house was built for the client's own indulgence,' explains architect Sally Mackereth

